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Opening extract from

Nut Cracker

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Snow had begun to fall on Christmas Eve. During the night, the snowflakes grew bigger by the hour and on Christmas morning, snow was falling, snow on snow, until you could no longer hear the footsteps of people passing in the street. Sleighs had replaced wheeled carriages and as they glided past the house, the only sound was the tinkling of the horses' harness.

Fritz and Clara were not allowed into the big room until everything was ready. They had to stay in the kitchen, trying to guess who was coming and going, and what their presents would be. From their parents, Fritz was hoping for a squadron of hussars to add to his army of toy soldiers, and a wily fox to join his animals. Clara had set her heart on a new dress for her favourite doll, but what might they receive from their godfather, Dr Drosselmeier? He was a clockmaker by trade and when one of the clocks in the house fell ill, he would come and probe the workings with long, pointed instruments, until the clock would whirr and strike the hour again. He was rather a strange man, but kindly, and always made them ingenious mechanical toys.

When it was quite dark, the doors to the big room were flung open and the children rushed into a wonderland. There stood a Christmas tree alive with flickering candles, with gold and silver apples hanging from the branches, as well as brightly wrapped sweets and little gingerbread men with red collars and smiles. Clara soon spotted a new doll and a beautiful silk striped dress, which she wanted to try on straight away. Fritz, after galloping four times round the table, found his new hussars as well as the wily fox.

When they had calmed down a little, their godfather whipped away a cloth to reveal a magnificent castle with golden turrets. Through the windows they could see ladies in feathered hats dancing with gentlemen in long cloaks, doorways in which figures appeared for a moment then vanished, and rooms with children playing. Fritz wanted to go inside the castle, but his godfather said he was much too big and this made Fritz rather grumpy.

Beside the Christmas tree, Clara spotted a little figure with an over-large head. He was dressed in an hussar's jacket with gold buttons, shiny leather boots and an odd-looking wooden cloak sticking out of his back.

For Clara, it was love at first sight.

"To whom does he belong?" she asked curiously.

"He is Godfather Drosselmeier's gift for both of you," replied her father. "His name is Nutcracker and that is what he does."



Father lifted Nutcracker's cloak, the large mouth opening wide to reveal two rows of sharp teeth. He put in a hazelnut and CRACK! it broke open. The children both wanted to try, but as Fritz took his turn he insisted on choosing larger and larger, and harder and harder, nuts, until suddenly Nutcracker's jaw dropped loose and three little teeth fell to the floor.

"What have you done, Fritz, you cruel brother!" cried Clara, as she pulled the wounded Nutcracker out of his hands. She picked up the three teeth, bound up his jaw and clasped the poor creature in her arms. Fritz shrugged his shoulders and galloped away to hunt the fox.

Later that Christmas night, when the party was over and bedtime approached, Clara asked her mother if she could stay downstairs a little longer. Her mother agreed. Clara's dolls were kept on the lowest shelf of a large glass-fronted cabinet in the big room. Fritz's soldiers and their barracks were on the next shelf and on the top shelves lived their godfather's wonderful toy creations, considered too precious for everyday play. When she was alone, Clara carefully placed the wounded Nutcracker in her new doll's bed and lifted it on to Fritz's shelf, so that Nutcracker would be protected by the hussars. As she shut the glass door, she heard a strange whispering that grew louder and louder. A clock movement began to whirr and grind.

Suddenly the golden owl on top of the clock sprang to life; opening its wings and spreading them across the clock face, it stuck out its beak and called:

"Strike away, oh Mouse King's clock!"

And the clock struck midnight.

Clara was breathless with terror and the more so when she saw that instead of the owl on top of the clock, there sat Godfather Drosselmeier, his cloak spread out like the owl's wings. She could hear rustling, and, as the sound grew stronger, mice appeared in every corner of the room: squadrons of them came across the floor, massing together like Fritz's hussars. As if this were not enough, a monstrous mouse king with seven heads, each one wearing a golden crown, broke through the floor.

As Clara watched, she heard murmurings from the toy cabinet. Fritz's hussars were clambering out of their boxes and leaping to the floor. All of a sudden, Nutcracker rose from his bed and, in spite of his wounds, jumped down and called out to the hussars.

"Will you fight these mice? Will you follow me?" he called out to the troops.

"Yes! We shall follow you. Lead on to battle!" came the reply.

"Then beat the drums!" shouted Nutcracker.

The soldiers formed ranks and the attack began.